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Hearing looks at kids' health

Senators get out of D.C. for views on CHIP

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Sen. Max Baucus brought the Senate Finance Committee to "where the rubber meets the road" and "the real decisions are made" on Wednesday with a field hearing in Billings about the Children's Health Insurance Program.

The Montana Democrat, who chairs the finance committee, said he wanted Montanans to tell his colleagues in Washington, D.C., how to improve and expand the program, set to expire Oct. 1 without congressional action.

"It's not often we get to have a hearing outside D.C.," Baucus told an audience of about 60 people at Montana State University-Billings. "This hearing gives the Senate Finance Committee a great opportunity to hear how (CHIP) works at the state level."

Committee member Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., joined Baucus at the hearing.

Testimony presented by 16 Montanans was recorded and will be provided to other committee members and preserved in the Congressional Record.

A federal budget blueprint that has not been approved includes \$50 billion to pay for CHIP for five years. The program receives matching funds from states.

Baucus said he wants legislation extending and improving CHIP, which provides health insurance to 6 million children nationwide and 13,350 in Montana, to pass the finance committee by summer.

"I plan to move on this very quickly," he said. "I'm not going to tempt fate by waiting until close to the deadline."

CHIP should be reauthorized and its impact broadened, said people who spoke at the hearing. Its income guidelines should be softened to make more children eligible, it should be easier for pregnant women to get coverage and the dental benefit should be increased, they said.

Dr. Kevin Rencher, a pediatric dentist from Helena, testified that children desperately in need of dental care are not getting it under the current system.

In the past two weeks, Rencher treated five children with severe dental infections or tooth decay.

"Had these patients waited any longer to seek care, they would have become the next dental tragedy," Rencher said, referring to a Maryland boy who died in February after infection from an abscessed tooth reached his brain.

Baucus and Cantwell also heard testimony from local and state health officials, a woman whose son used the program, state politicians and a minister.

All implored the government to continue the program.

"In the end, the greatness of our nation is measured not by our might but by the health and wellbeing of our peoples and the mercy and compassion of our governance," said Vernon Wright, a United Church of Christ minister from Helena.